MARY AND HER SONG
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Psalm 72:1–7
Luke 1:39–56

"My soul magnifies the Lord, . . . ,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."
Luke 1:46, 48 (NRSV)

Mary is who we are. She is a person of faith who does not always understand
but who seeks to put her trust in God. She is one who is blessed
not because she sins less or has keener insights into the things of God.
She is instead blessed, as we are, because she is called by God
to participate in the work of God. . . . To call Mary blessed is to
recognize the blessedness of ordinary people who are called to participate
in that which is extraordinary.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia Rigby
Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary

As you came into the lives of unlikely and unsuspecting people long ago,
O God, an old couple, a frightened teenager, so come to us.
Come and awaken us: come and startle us again,
come and open our hearts to your love in Jesus Christ. Amen.

I received a series of e-mail pictures from a member of the congregation last week. And yes, with a little advice and coaching, I have learned how to open them and access them. One of the pictures was of a group of women holding infants and children in their arms, several rows of them sitting on benches beneath a tent-like canopy, looking into the camera, cradling their children. There weren't many smiles in this photo-op. The picture was taken in Kumba, Cameroon, West Africa, at an AIDS clinic. The mothers are poor, most of them gravely ill themselves; their babies are also ill. They live in a land where an astonishing percentage of adults suffer from HIV/AIDS. Now the children carry the virus. These women have walked a very long way to seek help. It was a heartbreaking picture of mothers, lovingly cradling their infants and children. Kathleen Norris says that every poor mother and her baby—in Africa, Southeast Asia, Central America, Palestine, Cabrini—is a

reminder of Madonna and child. I couldn't help but think of that young mother, Mary, and her infant son, in a stable long ago.

It is probably the most painted scene in the history of art. It is etched so deeply in our hearts. It is so human, so intimate, so authentic that in spite of all the sentimental romanticism of the season we still recognize in Mary and her newborn something incredibly important about God's way with us.

Luke introduces Christmas with a series of very human stories. The first story is about an elderly, childless couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. When a messenger from God comes to tell him that his wife will conceive, old Zechariah can't and won't believe it, is struck dumb until his son, John, is born, is given a nine-month pregnancy of his own in which to think things over.

The second story is about a young relative of Elizabeth, Mary of Nazareth. The messenger of God comes to her as well to announce that she, not married, will conceive. Her son will be the Son of the Most High, God's own son. Mary is perplexed and afraid. She's very young, engaged to Joseph, her betrothed. It's a dilemma. The neighbors will gossip. And what is she supposed to tell her parents and her fiancé? So she visits Elizabeth, an older relative, her aunt perhaps, now six months along in her own unlikely and unexpected pregnancy. Elizabeth, bless her heart, opens her home and her arms and her heart. She thinks Mary's embarrassing, awkward, and morally questionable condition is just wonderful and says so. "Blessed are you among women, Mary," Elizabeth says to a frightened, marginalized adolescent. Every teenager needs an aunt like that.

The third story Luke tells to introduce Christmas is the story of Mary's response to all of this. New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa says that after the emotional power of that moment when Mary is told by the angel—the moment she understands the mysterious and frightening thing that is happening to her—and after the amazing grace of Elizabeth's acceptance and affirmation and blessing, after all that it is time for Mary to say something. When Mary finds her voice, it is quite a speech. We know it as the Magnificat. The ancient church sang it regularly, and Benedictine monasteries still chant it every night. Johann Sebastian Bach put it to some of the most glorious music ever written, *The Magnificat:*

> My soul magnifies the Lord . . .
> for he has looked with favor on the
> lowliness of his servant. . . .
> The Mighty One has done
> great things for me.

There follows a list of great things that God has done, strong things, a list that doesn't make it into many Christmas greetings:

God has—
scattered the proud,
brought down the powerful from their thrones,
filled the hungry,
sent the rich away empty.

That's quite a speech. Hallmark has never come up with a way to use it in a Christmas card. Preachers get in trouble for saying things like that. It sounds an awful lot like politics and economics, sounds like someone is going to upset the dominant political structure and redistribute the wealth.

William Willimon writes about that moment, "Mary breaks into song. But it is not a lullaby she sings. . . . The little pregnant girl looks out across the Judean hills bathed in winter twilight and sings. She thinks she hears kingdoms fall and the earth rock beneath her feet. She feels the child within her move and she hums a little tune of liberation" (*On a Wild and Windy Mountain*, p. 21).

Mary can't help but wonder why she was chosen, a peasant girl, poor, young, vulnerable, weak. If God was choosing someone to give birth to God's own son, you would think he might have chosen a mature, strong woman in the royal palace. Unless, of course, the choice of Mary—young, poor, vulnerable—represents something important about God, unless who Mary is—young, poor, vulnerable—redefines how God comes into the world and works in the world in unexpected ways, through the lives of humble, unlikely people.

God, this young woman is saying, cares deeply and passionately about people and how they live, the conditions of their lives in the world. God cares a lot about those who are shut out and marginalized in the world. God cares a lot about people who, in this plentiful world, are hungry. God cares a lot about injustice and suffering and inequality.

The Magnificat ought to make us—the ones who celebrate the birth of God's son so intentionally—permanently uncomfortable with the reality of poverty and homelessness, the reality that millions of our own children go to bed hungry every night, the reality that millions of American families live without adequate health care. As we welcome the Christ child, we ought to be made uncomfortable about the way the current economy exacerbates and increases the gap between the rich and the poor—uncomfortable in light of his mother's confidence that God will fill the poor and send the rich away empty.

It is a mistake, I think, either to glamorize the poor or demonize the rich. Jesus himself didn't do it.

It was Jesus not Karl Marx, someone pointed out, who said, "How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven." But Jesus also had wealthy friends—Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. He was no single-issue social reformer. He did take the side of the underdog, and he did reach out to and include the excluded, and he did seem to go out of his way to be with the poor and outcast. But what he wanted and wants from every man and woman is a personal spiritual revolution, a reordering of values and commitments. I think what God has in mind is a small revolution in your life and mine, regardless of how much money we have or don't have, a private liberation movement, which every one of us could use.

In the Bible the poor know they are poor. In the Bible the poor know how dependent they are on others, how ultimately vulnerable they—and we—all are, only they seem more aware of it. In the Bible the poor seem to understand that the only things of real value in this life are the gifts—not what we earn or have become, but what we are given: the world, beauty, friendship, people to love.

The trouble with the mighty in the Bible is that they don't need anything—or think they don't. Calvin Seminary's Cornelius Plantinga says, "When life is good our prayers for the kingdom get a little faint. We whisper our prayers for the kingdom so that God can't quite hear them. 'Thy kingdom come,' we pray, and hope it won't. When our own kingdom has had a good year we aren't necessarily looking for God's kingdom" ("In the Interim: Between Two Advents," *Christian Century,* 6 December 2000).

Mary's Magnificat is particularly relevant for those of us who are not poor, particularly relevant for those of us who live and move and have our being in American consumer culture, where we have never experienced anything but abundance, which tells us over and over that our chief end is not to glorify God and enjoy him forever as the old Catechism said, but to earn, spend, accumulate.

In one of his elegant essays, Wendell Berry says, "It is astonishing to see economics elevated to the position of ultimate justifier and explainer of all the affairs of our daily life. . . . All assume, apparently, that we are in the grip of the determination of economic laws that are the laws of the universe. It seems that we have been reduced to a state of absolute economics." Berry objects: It is the privilege of human beings to choose the laws by which they live. It is not determined that the laws of supply and demand and competition are the only choice we have. "We can decide to live by the laws of justice and mercy" ("Economy and Pleasure," *The Art of the Commonplace,* pp. 207–214).

Commenting on Mary's Magnificat, Kathleen Norris asks, "How do I answer when the mystery of God's love breaks through my defensiveness and doubt? . . . Have I been so rich, stuffed full of myself, my plans and my possessions that I have in fact denied Christ a rightful place on earth?" (*Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary,* Foreword).

The Magnificat teaches a simple truth: You cannot receive a gift unless you have a place for it. You cannot learn anything if you think you know it all. You can't enjoy beauty unless there is a place in you that yearns for it. You can't receive love unless you know there is a place in you that is empty and needs love to fill it.

You can't be lifted up unless you know you are poor.

In the meantime those of us who are making our way slowly but surely to Bethlehem are commissioned to remember how passionately God cares about human beings and particularly those who are weak and vulnerable—like those mothers waiting patiently, holding their little ones in their arms, at an AIDS clinic in Kumba, Cameroon. They were waiting to see a member of the Fourth Presbyterian Church, Dr. Bernie Blaauw, one of Chicago's most distinguished physicians in AIDS treatment and prevention. Dr. Blaauw is in Kumba to start up a new clinic, and it is underway. The person holding the camera and taking the pictures was Francis Ntowe, a pharmacist, a Cameroonian, a current member of our Session. Bernie and Francis have gathered a small group of people, mostly members of this church; they have collaborated with the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon to launch their project. Francis wrote back to Chris Valentine, a member of the group, on December 1:

> Hello Chris. A happy Friday morning and a happy World AIDS Day 2006. I hope you have the sun out today, Chris. God is so good to us for this day to come, and we have started our HIV/AIDS services at the Presbyterian hospital in Kumba. This morning we had the official opening, with speeches from the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon, the health services, and staff. The place was full of people, and Dr. Blaauw gave a very nice speech. As I listened to him I could not hold back tears. I was very happy and proud that we had Dr. Blaauw here. Today we did about twenty-two HIV tests—two were positive. Dr. Blaauw saw four HIV patients from today and two from before. This is a big day for us. The staff are very happy. The Presbyterian church is happy. I am indeed thankful to all my friends who have supported this. Chris, I have to go. It is too emotional for me. My love to all. Francis.

I think that's something of what Mary had in mind. "My soul magnifies the Lord; the Mighty One has done great things. He has scattered the proud,

brought down the powerful. He has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things."

Let Mary teach you this year to celebrate the birth of her son by loosening your grip a bit. Let her upset your values, let her scatter the mightiness in your life and lift you up in you your own need, your vulnerability, your dependence on others.

Let Mary start a quiet revolution in you. Let her set you free from the obsession that oppresses most of us—to work harder and harder in order to get ahead in order to earn more in order to consume more.

Let Mary lead you away from your identity as an economic unit, a potential consumer, away from a Christmas defined by how many gifts you received or purchased, to a Christmas elegantly simple, defined not at all in economic terms but in terms of love—the love you are privileged to give, the precious gift of the love of others that will come to you.

Let Mary lead you in a different direction altogether—toward a little town, a stable behind a crowded inn, a cow stall, a manger where you will find the light of the world, love unconditional, the gift of your salvation. Amen.